

# Documentary film: what is it?

Three dimensions to think about documentary:

- *Filmmaker*. The position and role of the authorial subject (author/authority), including the filmmaking *process* (control, mise-en-scène, relationship to the *historical world* and *social actors*)
- *Text*. The audiovisual structure, including conventions of genre (narrative, realism) and stylistic features (such as interviews, long takes, sparse editing, etc).
- *Viewer*. Expectations and experience of the viewer. Based on a relationship of trust (“trust dynamic”, consent) and related to a shared notion of *the real*.

- *The real*: at once a foundational notion in the “documentary pact” between filmmaker and viewer, and a contested notion subject to interpretation (construction of *truth*, involving persuasion).
- *Historical world*: the world displayed, told, represented. As opposed to the *mise-en-scène* (fictional or not).
- “Cinema is a realist art: but it remains that this realist art has progressed only by means of straining against its own principle, through forceful doses of unrealism” (Chion, 1994: 54).



# Documentary modes of representation (from Nichols chapter 2)

## Expository mode

- Didactic (emphasis on content/information, narration)
- Directly addressing the viewer
- Centrality of argument / thesis
- Verbal commentary: ranging from off-screen “voice-of-God” commentary to onscreen anchorperson or gatekeeper.
- Also, poetic evocation of argument through formal (audiovisual) structure.
- Images as illustration of argument: the logic and rhetoric of argumentation dominate over the time-space unity of the visual *text*: sound as fundamental to this process.
- Generalization
- Witnesses (interviewees) support the argument.

# Observational mode

- Ambiguity of terms *observational cinema*, *direct cinema* and *cinéma vérité*.
- Claim: unmediated access to the *historical world* (showing rather than telling)
- Indirect address: the world unfolds before the camera as if it were unobserved.
- No or minimal verbal commentary.
- Time-space unity of the *historical world*: focus on specific events and locations in “real time”, depiction of everyday life, present tense, little or no generalizations: logical continuity of argument is replaced by spatial and temporal continuity of the world being observed.
- Visual and sound editing emphasizing/constructing such continuity (long takes; synchronous, and diegetic sound)
- Widespread ethnographic mode, that however uses a frame of reference similar to fiction film: observing and overhearing (but use of music may be markedly different).



# Interactive mode

- Encounter (representation of the *historical world* results from interactions)
- Filmmaker is visible and audible, and interacts with *social actors*, rather than addressing the viewer.
- Present tense, situational, local, partial, including unexpected narrative developments as a result of interactions.
- Interviews and dialogue with filmmaker as central: witness-centred voice of testimony (including contradictions, complexities, unresolved problems, interpretations).
- Filmmaker and social actors as peers?
- Issue of “masked interviews”

## Reflexive mode

- Reflection on representation (the *text*) itself, self-consciousness.
- Meta-commentary on the *process* of filmmaking, whether through filmmaker's direct intervention onscreen or through disclosing cinematic forms and procedures.
- The *text* gains prominence over the *historical world* represented: documentary as a fabrication.
- Filmmaker as authoring agent, rather than participant-observer: reflection on difference and power relations.
- Encounter between filmmaker and viewer.
- Challenging the conventions of realism: poetic, essayist, introspective modes.
- Or enunciating political concerns/subjectivities within a realist mode.



## KEY TERMS (techniques) of Sound in Film (mostly drawn from Michel Chion)

- *Diegetic sound*: sound that is made to appear as belonging to the scene onscreen (whether it actually does or not): sound that is presented as being heard by social actors/characters onscreen.
- *Non-diegetic sound*: sound whose source does not belong to the time-space continuum depicted onscreen (not heard by social actors/characters). Diegetic sound can become non-diegetic and vice versa.
- *Acousmatic sound*: sound whose source is not seen/displayed. All non-diegetic sounds are acousmatic, but not all acousmatic sounds are non-diegetic.
- *Off-screen sound*: acousmatic diegetic sound.
- *Pit music*: non-diegetic music. *Screen music*: diegetic music. *On-the-air sound/music*: sound/music that easily crosses the diegetic/non-diegetic divide: typically, TV and radio sounds.
- *Detour*: *diegesis* (epos) and *mimesis* (drama) in classical poetics: narration/telling and showing/enacting. Traditionally, film is considered diegetic due to its use of narrative strategies (editing, camerawork, sound, etc). In documentary film the relationship between *diegesis* and *mimesis* has been complex and contested. In film discourse, *diegesis* refers more technically to anything that directly belongs to the scene being depicted. In terms of classical poetics, also *non-diegetic* elements are part of the film narrative.

- *Added value* (coined by Michel Chion):

“A sensory, informational, semantic, narrative, structural or expressive value that sounds lead us to project onto the image, so as to create the impression that we see in an image what in reality we are *audio-viewing*. It is a common phenomenon; its effects tend to go unnoticed.” (2009: 466)

“Expressive or informational value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression... that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself.” (1994: 5)

E.g. spatial-temporal unity.

In documentaries about music, is the relationship between *visual* and *sonic* reversed in terms of *added value*?

- *Empathetic sound/music*: sound/music directly expressing its participation in the emotional tone/ethos of the scene.
- *Anempathetic sound/music*: sound/music exhibiting conspicuous *indifference* to the situation depicted in the scene (common technique of parody, exaggeration, emotional displacement, etc).